



CUBA: Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2003-2004

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

"The government of my country, by denying civil rights to the citizens, is denying to the Cuban people the right of self-determination."

-- Oswaldo Payá Sardinas, winner of the Sakharov Prize in 2002

CUBA

Cuba is a totalitarian state controlled by Fidel Castro, who exercises control over all aspects of life through the Communist Party and its affiliated mass organizations, the government bureaucracy and a formidable state security apparatus. The Government's poor human rights record worsened in 2003, and it continued to commit numerous serious abuses. The authorities routinely continued to harass, threaten, arbitrarily arrest, detain, imprison and defame human rights advocates and members of independent professional associations, including journalists, economists, doctors and lawyers, often with the goal of coercing them into leaving the country. The Government used internal and external exile against such persons. The Government denied political dissidents and human rights advocates due process and subjected them to unfair trials. Members of the security forces and prison officials continued to beat and abuse detainees and prisoners, including human rights activists. The Government failed to prosecute or sanction adequately members of the security forces and prison guards who committed abuses. Prison conditions remained harsh and life threatening, and the Government restricted medical care to some prisoners as a method of control. The Government infringed on citizens' privacy rights. The Government restricted some religious activities but permitted others. Violence against women, especially domestic violence, and child prostitution were problems. Racial discrimination was a problem. The Government severely restricted worker rights, including the right to form independent unions.

During 2003, the Castro government responded to citizen efforts to bring about democratic reforms by arresting more than 75 activists, independent journalists and independent librarians, subjecting them to summary trials, and sentencing them to between 6 and 28 years imprisonment. These summary trials were marked by a lack of transparency and due process and drew broad condemnation from foreign governments and non-governmental organizations. The defendants were falsely accused of being employees of and having received funds from the United States.

In the face of open hostility by the Cuban Government toward both the United States and pro-democracy activists, the United States has responded to the crackdown by greatly increasing high-level public statements on Cuba's human rights issues and encouraging other members of the international community to address them as well, and continuing moral and material support for Cuban civil society. Public outreach by U.S. officials was a particularly important demonstration of that moral support and of the U.S. Interests Section's determination to continue its efforts.

In the midst of the summary trials of the 75 dissidents, Chief of Mission James Cason spoke on Cuban civil society at the University of Miami, drawing attention to both the crackdown and the efforts of Cuban activists to endure despite repression. Secretary of State Powell and the State Department Spokesman issued press statements demanding the release of the 75 victims of the crackdown and all other political prisoners. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere

Affairs Roger Noriega made public statements promoting human rights and a democratic transition in Cuba, including an October speech at the University of Miami in which he described both the continuing repression of the Castro regime and the efforts of the United States to promote a transition. Secretary Powell utilized his intervention at the Plenary of the General Assembly of the Organization of American States in June to insist that Cuba be held to the standards set by the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations Kim Holmes and Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Lorne Craner testified at a special hearing of the U.S. House International Relations Committee in April 2003.

These efforts culminated in President Bush's October 10 speech on Cuba at the White House, in which he firmly condemned the Cuban Government crackdown. The President went on to announce the formation of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, which will work to accelerate the peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba and coordinate U.S. support to a free and democratic Cuban Government. These powerful public statements complemented parallel diplomatic efforts to generate broad international pressure for democratic change in Cuba, building upon the international criticism triggered by the Castro government's harsh repression of peaceful dissidents.

Within Cuba, the U.S. Interests Section continued its activities in support of civil society, despite the high level of harassment by the regime. Under its Enhanced Outreach Initiative, the Interests Section worked to promote democracy, human rights, free-market principles and the development of a civil society. This initiative focused on practical informational programs to promote democratic reforms and strengthen civil society, including projects to support broader and balanced access to objective information.

In addition, U.S. officers follow the cases of more than 350 prisoners of conscience, meet with the relatives of political prisoners as a demonstration of moral support and invite members of civil society to representational events, thereby underscoring the legitimacy of their efforts. On May 20, the Chief of Mission dedicated a monument to Cuban democracy activists at his residence, in an event attended by families of political prisoners. U.S. efforts to meet with Cubans throughout the country were hindered by a government ban on travel by U.S. officials outside of Havana and a prohibition on the commercial importation of books on democracy, economics, business, human rights and other topics.

Nevertheless, the United States successfully distributed news, books, radios, videos and Cuban political and historical literature (otherwise unavailable in Cuba). The U.S. Interests Section also offers Internet access to members of civil society. Officers in the Interests Section also worked to counter government propaganda by briefing visitors from the United States and other countries on local human rights conditions.

To strengthen domestic and international awareness of the human rights situation in Cuba, the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor produced a pamphlet on the lack of fundamental freedoms in Cuba entitled "The Dream Deferred – Fear and Freedom in Fidel's Cuba." Available in both English and Spanish, this succinct but comprehensive publication is in the process of dissemination both to U.S. embassies and human rights groups, and will be included in briefings and other public outreach.

Despite government claims of complete religious freedom in Cuba, religious activities remain heavily circumscribed. The U.S. Interests Section offers information to religious organizations on the island. Religious figures from a broad range of denominations, including those not officially registered by the Government, were invited to representational events in recognition of their important roles in society.

Labor rights are severely constrained, and the country's foremost independent labor organizers were jailed during the March 2003 crackdown. The United States worked to disseminate accurate information on international labor standards, as well as the 2003 report of the International Labor Organization's Committee on Freedom of Association citing Cuba's failure to meet internationally recognized labor standards.

The Cuban Government rejected efforts to engage on the issue of trafficking in persons, asserting the United States has no standing to address the problem of child prostitution in Cuba. Although lax oversight at some government-run tourist facilities has contributed to child prostitution, the Cuban Government has refused to recognize or discuss the phenomenon, publish statistics on child sexual abuse and prostitution or conduct public awareness campaigns demonstrating its commitment to combating this form of trafficking in persons.